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ABSTRACT

A study determined whether kindergarten teachers encouraged invented writing experiences among children to prepare them for reading and how teachers implemented invented spelling experiences in the kindergarten program. Subjects, 314 kindergarten teachers (out of 600 randomly selected kindergarten teachers in Iowa), responded to a survey of their classroom practices. Results indicated that although the vast majority of kindergarten teachers reported that they encourage children to use invented spellings, their writing experiences were neither frequent nor spontaneous. Results also indicated that teachers typically planned whole group writing activities within a given time frame and for a particular purpose. Findings suggest that the spontaneity observed in young children's early writing was absent from most kindergartens. (Four figures of data are included; 17 references are attached.) (RS)

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How Kindergarten Teachers Implement Literacy: A Survey

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How Kindergarten Teachers Implement Literacy: A Survey

It's been nearly two decades since Charles Read (1971) completed his study in which he followed the linguistic development of 20 preschoolers. By analyzing their early writing attempts Read reported that the spellings produced by four- and five-year-olds were surprisingly systematic and uniform. These prereaders could construct approximations of words (e.g., spelling my, m-i) with only partial knowledge of letter names and letter sounds. From these findings, Read suggested that perhaps young children's propensity to write, using invented spellings, should be fostered in preprimary classrooms.

More recent research appears to corroborate Read's findings. That is, a number of researchers have reported that children's early spelling attempts reflect a developmental sequence (Henderson & Beers, 1980; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1983). In addition, some have reported that analyzing children's spelling productions at the end of kindergarten or the beginning of first grade serves as a good predictor of subsequent reading achievement (Morris & Perney, 1985; Robinson, 1990). Still others report that training prereaders in spelling tasks, where they segment speech sounds as they map them into printed letters, may facilitate children's ability to read real and nonsense words (Bradley & Bryant, 1985; Ehri & Wilce, 1987; Uhry & Shepherd, 1990).

It is therefore, not surprising to find today's pedagogical literature burgeoning with recommendations for pre-first grade programs to incorporate many meaningful writing experiences in the classroom as a way to introduce children to reading (e.g., Hall, 1987; Strickland & Morrow, 1989). This recommendation of encouraging writing activities that allow preprimary age children to experiment with written language has even received the endorsement of numerous educational organizations, such as the International Reading Association (1986) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1986). One might therefore expect to find the contemporary kindergarten program rich in writing experiences.

Nonetheless, a number of authors (Jalongo & Zeigler, 1987; Spillman & Lutz, 1986) suggest that only a very small percentage of kindergarten programs introduce children to meaningful writing experiences. The accuracy of such speculations have been questioned by Durkin (1987) who notes that "studies of kindergarten reading programs are virtually nonexistent." Although this conclusion formed the premise for her own study of Illinois' kindergarten reading programs in 1987, Durkin's comprehensive investigation did not address the invented writing

experiences of children.

It would therefore appear that empirical evidence was needed to learn how today's kindergarten teachers approach reading at a time when the writing-reading connection appears pervasive. Hence, the purpose of the current study was 1) to determine if kindergarten teachers encouraged invented writing experiences among children as one way to prepare them for reading, and 2) to learn how teachers implemented invented spelling experiences in the kindergarten program.

Method

A computer generated, random sampling was conducted of the approximately 2,800 kindergarten teachers listed with the department of education in the state of Iowa. The survey was mailed in April of 1988 to 600 teachers who were currently teaching in public kindergarten classrooms. Three-hundred and fourteen surveys were returned resulting in a return rate of 52%.

In an effort to acquire accurate information no attempt was made to identify the individual respondents, their schools or school districts. They were simply asked to respond to the questions as they apply to the practices they use with their kindergartners. The question format included yes and no, rank-order, and short answer questions. Whenever a forced choice format was used respondents were also provided with the category, "other" and asked to specify or explain. Frequencies were conducted on all the questions. Percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number and are reported only when they exceed one percent.

Results and Discussion

One of the primary purposes of this study was to learn whether or not kindergarten teachers encourage children to use invented spellings. Figure 1 illustrates that the vast majority of kindergarten teachers promote writing experiences where children spell words as they hear them. That is, 87% of the teachers surveyed report that they introduce a variety of meaningful writing experiences to children, while 4% report that they do not and 9% report that they only provide writing experiences that emphasize proper letter formation. These findings would seem to contradict authors who speculate that the invented spelling concept is not wide-spread among kindergartens. Indeed, it would appear that most kindergarten teachers, at least report, introducing children to meaningful writing experiences as one way to prepare them for reading.

This disparity among the writing practices used by

kindergarten teachers is intriguing. Why do some teachers encourage the use of invented spellings while others do not? To examine this question, the teachers (n=42) who do not encourage children to use invented spellings were asked to explain their reluctance. Respondents were asked to select among several items, the statements that best describe their rationale. The three most frequent explanations were as follows: 1. Writing experiences are developmentally inappropriate for kindergarten age children, 2. Training or information has not been provided about how to present the invented spelling activities in the kindergarten program, and 3. "Other", in which respondents most frequently explained that there was not enough time in the current kindergarten program (citing a half day program).

These explanations provide insight into why some kindergarten teachers prepare learning environments that are void of children's writing. It is encouraging to note, among this group, that at least some of the teachers indicate a willingness to include writing activities if training or information were to be provided. Even teachers who explained that the present program does not allow enough time for writing experiences might be receptive to suggestions of ways to modify existing practices to include opportunities for children to use invented spellings. These suggestions would need to be informal, child-directed activities that would not require additional time from the program. For example, instead of taking attendance by calling out children's names or showing names printed on individual cards, children could write their names each day as they entered the classroom on a large check-in sheet, under the heading, "Are you here?" Or perhaps, encourage children to write notes to one another by having individual mailboxes and stationery available in the classroom. Such suggestions would not require additional time from the program, they are not teacher-directed, whole class activities. Rather, they provide children opportunities to use written language in meaningful ways.

Teachers who promote invented spelling experiences among their kindergartners (n=272) were also asked to explain their reasons for using this approach. The kindergarten teachers were asked to select among several items, the statements that best explain why they encourage children to use invented spellings. From a rank-order, the most frequent response selected was that they feel writing is a logical component of a total language program. The second most frequent reason was that they believe that these writing experiences will help prepare children to become successful readers. Other less frequent responses included expectations of administration and parents for kindergarten children to write.

These perceptions of the value of children's experiences with invented spellings are also noteworthy. Many of these teachers also operate half-day programs, but providing time for children to experiment with printed language appears to be a priority. Perhaps this is the result of attending one of the many emergent literacy workshops or from reading some of the many articles appearing in educational journals promoting children's use of invented spellings. All teachers (N=314) were also asked to indicate any workshops they have attended and any educational journals that they have subscribed to that may advocate the use of invented spellings in preprimary classrooms.

Among those who attended a literacy-oriented conference (n=165), we found 93% reported to introduce children to invented spellings. And, among those who subscribe to literacy-oriented journals (n=68), 93% also reported to introduce children to meaningful writing experiences. Although these figures would appear to support the use of workshops and journals for dissemination of information, we would refrain from suggesting that either are particularly effective in implementing change in the curriculum. It is more plausible that most teachers who attend conferences or subscribe to educational journals are likely to be those who are interested in implementing the more current trends or practices reported in education. Indeed, perhaps the strongest statement the results suggest is that few of our practitioners subscribe to literacy-oriented journals that describe how children learn to read and write.

To further examine why some teachers encourage invented spellings while others do not, we also investigated teachers understanding of how children learn to read. Ida Stewart (1985) has suggested that the practices teachers use in the classroom are dictated by their notion of how children learn to read. From this premise we asked the teachers who advocate using invented spellings (n=272) to identify among three items, the statements that best describes their understanding of how children should be prepared for reading. The statements included descriptions of an oral language approach, an academic approach, and an emergent literacy approach. That is, respondents could select any one of the following: 1) the kindergarten program should encourage children's oral language development before they are exposed to written language, or 2) the kindergarten program should emphasize direct instruction in the essential prereading skills (i.e., letter names, letter sounds, etc.), or 3) the kindergarten program should emphasize meaningful and functional language experiences in reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Among the teachers who encourage children to use invented spellings in the classroom (n=272) the data were analyzed to determine what approach teachers advocate for how children should be taught to read. As expected, the majority of teachers who encourage invented spellings support an emergent literacy approach (see Figure 2). However, it is also worth noting that almost 20% of the teachers who encourage children to spell words the way they sound, also believe that in order for children to learn to read, they must receive direct instruction in skills associated with beginning reading. These results may suggest that perhaps some teachers find the emergent literacy approach insufficient in preparing children to read. That is, activities in which children are encouraged to spell words the way they sound and to be exposed to a wide variety of printed materials and meaningful literature may not be enough for many children to learn to read. Therefore, it appears at least for some kindergarten teachers, that an emergent literacy approach must be combined with an academic approach. In this amalgamated program, children receive opportunities to experiment with written language as well as direct instruction in skills associated with beginning reading.

This amalgamated notion was verified when analysis of teachers' responses to other questions were examined. Kindergarten teachers who reported using invented spellings in their classrooms (n= 272) were also asked to indicate the types of beginning reading skills that they teach through direct instruction. Figure 3 shows that almost all of the teachers reported that their kindergartners are taught the letter names (99%) and letter sounds (97%). Other academically oriented skills, such as teaching children how to sound out words was reported to occur in a large majority of classrooms (80%). Even reading from a basal reader was reported in one third of the classrooms.

This emphasis on beginning reading skills appears wide spread among teachers who advocate an emergent literacy approach. However, it would not appear to be unique to Iowa's kindergarten teachers. Durkin (1987) noted in her study of Illinois' kindergarten teachers that almost all of the teachers were observed providing direct instruction in beginning reading skills, even when they claimed not to advocate teaching reading in kindergarten. Likewise, even in classrooms in which an emergent literacy approach is reported to dominate, direct instruction in beginning reading skills appears to play an equally important role in preparing children to read.

The second purpose of this study was to examine how teachers incorporate invented spelling activities into the kindergarten classroom. Again, only those teachers (n=272) who encourage their children to use invented spellings were

selected for the remaining analyses. Of particular concern was to learn how frequently children are likely to be involved in writing experiences.

Although the initial results reported thus far in this study have appeared to indicate wide-spread support for incorporating invented spellings in the classroom, a review of the teachers' other responses reveals that most kindergarten children are unlikely to experience frequent exposure to writing. Figure 4 shows that among teachers who reported using writing activities in the classroom only 15% indicated that these occurred daily. Indeed, 47% of the teachers indicated that writing activities occurred at best once a week. An additional 18% of the teachers selected "other" and explained that writing was not introduced to children until later in the kindergarten year. These findings were not expected particularly among a subgroup of teachers who claims to encourage children to use invented spellings. Many advocates of emergent literacy (e.g. Hall, 1987; Strickland & Morrow, 1989) have recommended that children be provided daily opportunities to write. Perhaps the emergent literacy approach implemented in many kindergarten programs may not involved adequate opportunities for children to experiment with written language.

Although a large majority of kindergarten teachers advocate that children experiment with written language, children's opportunities for writing appears to be seriously limited. This appears to present a contradiction. That is, teachers claim to advocate the use of invented spellings, but in practice children have few opportunities. Is this because teachers are not convinced about the value of invented spellings? It would seem not. Teachers were asked to indicate whether or not they believed that children's invented spelling experiences have had a positive impact on children's reading ability. Among this group, almost all the teachers reported that they believed it did (95%), while only 4% indicated that it was too early to determine. It would therefore seem that kindergarten teachers value these writing experiences for their children. Nonetheless, they reportedly provide little time for such worth while experiences. Could it be that most teachers perceive writing to be a teacher-directed, whole-class activity that requires a significant amount of time? As such, do teachers find it difficult to find additional time for writing in an already crowded curriculum? Teachers' responses appear to suggest that this may be one plausible explanation.

The authors examined how children's writing experiences are structured in the kindergarten program. It was discovered that for most of the kindergartners, writing experiences were not likely to be spontaneous nor an

activity that is initiated by children. That is, only 7% reported that children chose when and if they wanted to write. The majority (75%) reported that the teacher schedules the writing activity to begin and end at various predetermined times. Again, 18% of the teachers reported that writing would be introduced later in the kindergarten year and indicated that they had not yet determined when writing would be scheduled.

Most kindergarten teachers appear to have incorporated the majority of invented spelling experiences through teacher-directed activities that are presented to the whole class. Not surprisingly, children's writing experiences most frequently included opportunities to copy a message written by the teacher or to observe the teacher writing. Teachers were asked to indicate the types of writing experiences in which their children participated. The most frequent activities experienced by children included practicing writing their own names (100%), dictating stories that the teacher writes down (93%), writing and illustrating their own stories (85%), and copying messages written by the teacher (77%). However, few children are encouraged to use written language to communicate with a friend (27%) or respond to the teacher's message (30%). Kindergarten programs it seems seldom provide opportunities for children to use writing in purposeful and meaningful ways. The one exception may be writing and illustrating stories. However, this activity, at least for most kindergartners, appears to occur in a whole group and under the teacher's direction. The spontaneity that authors (e.g., Bissex, 1980) have observed in young children's early writing- using print to communicate important messages (e.g., RUDF?)- appears to be absent from most kindergartens.

In summary, although the vast majority of kindergarten teachers report that they encourage children to use invented spellings, these experiences are neither frequent nor spontaneous. Teachers typically plan whole group writing activities within a given time frame and for a particular purpose. This practice of presenting writing to children instead of encouraging children to write, may be a result of not knowing how to incorporate meaningful writing experiences in the classroom. The most frequent writing activity suggested by advocates of whole language has been to have children write stories (Graves, 1983). This activity is easily implemented in most primary classrooms. However, among kindergarten children who have only a partial understanding of written language, many meaningful experiences in experimenting and using print or needed.

In future research, perhaps proponents of emergent literacy could provide more helpful suggestions for incorporating such experiences in the classroom setting.

Until then the emergent literacy approach found in today's kindergarten is generally one in which children learn to read and write their own names, receive direct instruction on such beginning reading skills as letter names, letter sounds and sounding out words, and where, on occasion, children write and illustrate their own stories.

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Figure 1. Percentage of teachers' who encourage kindergartners to use invented spellings (N=314)

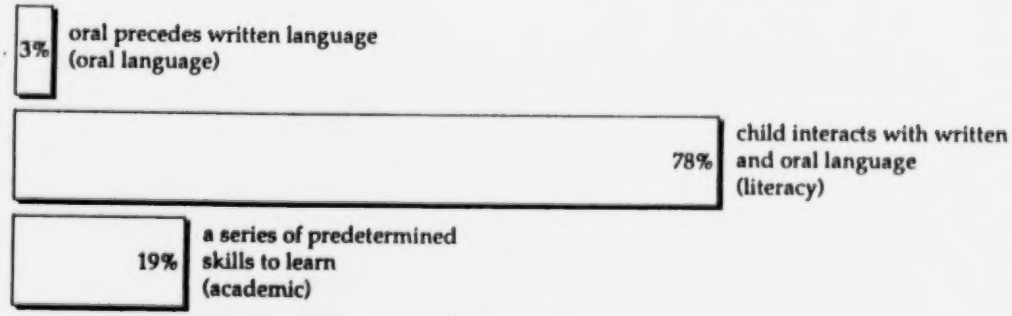

Figure 2. The perceptions of how to teach reading among kindergarten teachers who encourage children to use invented spellings

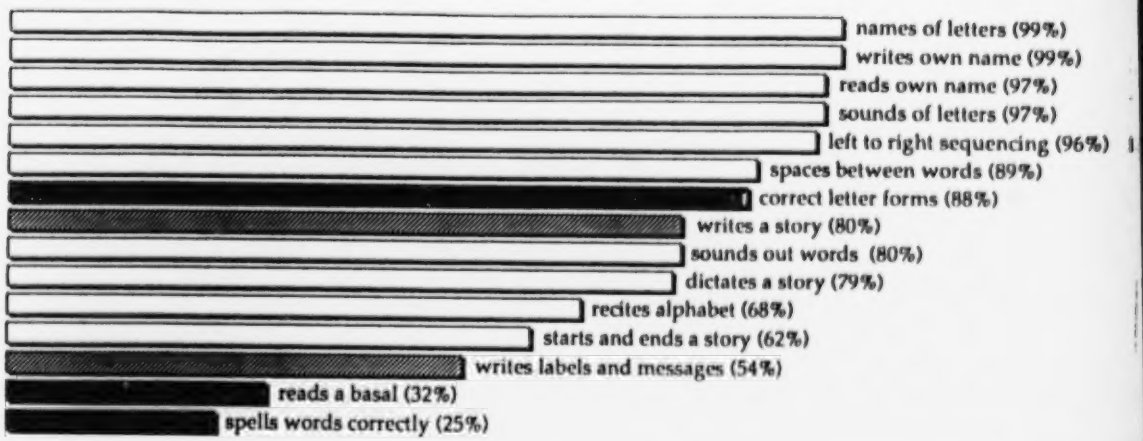
names of letters (99%)
writes own name (99%)
reads own name (97%)
sounds of letters (97%)
left to right sequencing (96%)
spaces between words (89%)
correct letter forms (88%)
writes a story (80%)
sounds out words (80%)
dictates a story (79%)
recites alphabet (68%)
starts and ends a story (62%)
writes labels and messages (54%)
reads a basal (32%)
spells words correctly (25%)

Figure 3. The academic skills in which kindergarten teachers provide direct instruction (n=272)

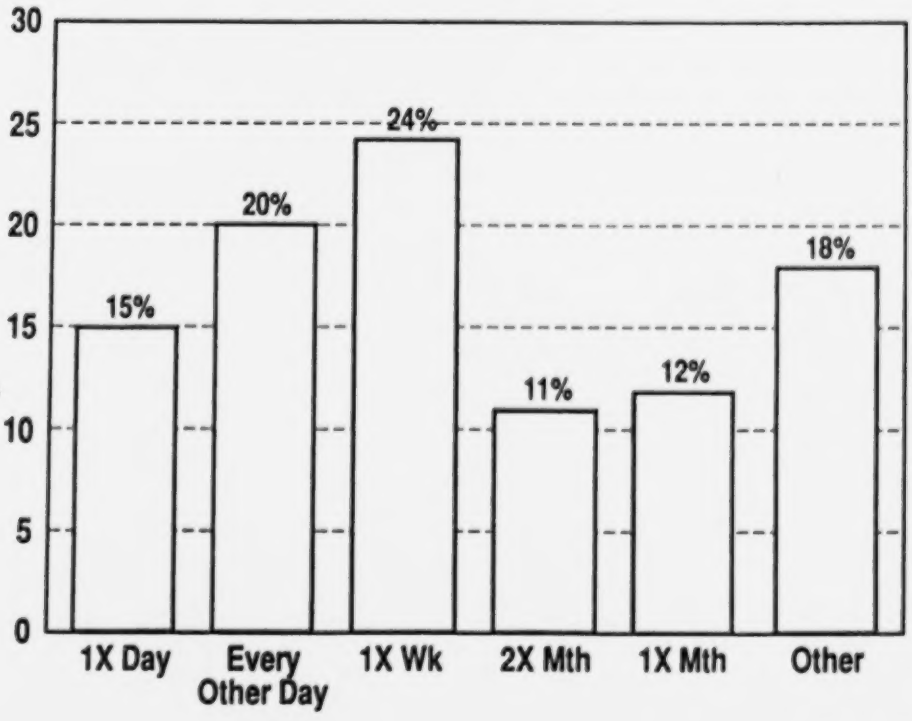

Figure 4. Frequency of writing experiences offered in kindergarten programs